

Shíjiān Zhī Shén

Time.

He had always felt like he had an infinite amount of it. Time was a certainty, something that he would always have more of. It wasn't until he escaped the prison that he realized just how precious it was. And how... cruel it was too. Decisions that he had all the time in the world to make before, now had to be made in minutes, less sometimes. He couldn't keep up, not with the way that the Infinite Realm flowed. It was too fast. He was out of place, out of time. And it didn't care at all for him.

Naha was the only thing keeping him anchored, allowing him to at least function somewhat. There were things that he couldn't grasp about this world. The way that they lived their lives, so carelessly, the way that they practiced such casual cruelty. Killing each other, as if life was worth nothing at all.

Since coming back, Zach had killed only twice, and both had been taken. He regretted that now, his anger had overwhelmed him. He had seen the connection they had to Hastur and just reacted with no time to think. But that was not who he was, who he wanted to be.

And yet, everywhere he looked, everything he heard and saw of this world, all of it just... disappointed him. He couldn't understand how they could bear to rid the world of something unique like life. Something outside of themselves that brought so much... chaos. And yet that is what they were doing, fighting wars and seeking power through violence. There was a world filled with mystery and riddles, and they looked only at blood.

If only they had more Time. If they had lived for longer, contemplated their existence. All of their lives were lived at such a quick pace, Zach felt as if they had no time to truly consider their actions.

He looked out at the city before him, the people walking around, living their lives. Mingling, talking with each other, reacting to stimuli outside of themselves. It was alien to him, but he was learning. And yet... Time was all that interested him. Even when looking at the city, seeing so many people, all he could think about was how much time they had? So few of them were

immortal, and few of those who were not, even tried to strive and become immortal. They acted as if they had all the time in the world, but their entire lives were but fleeting moments to him.

He felt himself closer to Time here. Something about the city, the way that it was built. The monuments that stood proud, the world given form of art in all things, it called to something in the back of his mind. It made his imagination, his perspective on Time, clearer. It was in the art of the city, something was given to make it, an essence of people who molded it. The River of Time was there, behind his eyes, always, but closer now.

“Zach, where are you?” A voice called among the noise of the city, piercing through his mind. It didn’t draw his attention, not in the way that it once could.

A part of him that was always vigilant, that looked for threat and flaws, it answered. *“On the walls.”*

A pause, then. *“I’m on—”*

The world turned white, and the roar of the River of Time inside his head lessened, for a moment. Three large objects appeared in the sky, and rain of light and fire fell onto the city. The shields above him lit up, and he saw the flaws in them, the points where they were weaker, where the attackers could break through. They didn’t have the same knowledge, their attacks were random and futile, the shields held.

“—It is a distraction Zach, the real attack is in the tower,” the voice spoke again, but it was a distant thing now. The noise of the River of Time was growing, thundering in between his ears.

The crystals on his wrist flashed, people trying to get in touch with him, but he... it wasn’t that he was ignoring them, he wasn’t not really. It was just hard to pull his mind from the topic of Time. The attack, the noise of it all, it pushed him down the recesses of his mind. His skill overwhelming his control for a single moment, and it sent him spiraling back down.

There, he saw. Every action, every event, it all built up the River of Time. He could see it. The once calm river had become a wild and foaming thing, and he was riding on top of it. So many actions, so many different choices, all of them influenced the path of the river. The edge of the wave was in front of him, close enough to touch. The Time, charting a course, creating the

present and the past. There was no future, just a wasteland in front of him. That was how he saw it.

Slowly, oh so slowly, he was starting to understand. He was mad, oh yes, he knew that, and he didn't care. Madness was an obsession, it was drive, it was need. And he had to learn the truth behind Time, all else was secondary. Life, death, the attack on the city, the mission, the contract he agreed on. Nothing was more important.

The world around him seeped away and only the river remained. The Timescape inside of his head was getting clearer by the moment, and in that it was also getting more... chaotic. It confused him. Images overlapped inside his head, one moment the Timescape was a river charting a course, creating the past behind it and going into an unknowable future. The next it was not a river at all, but a string being pulled from a yarn. Then a tapestry woven, each action a single string. Then it was a delta, a field of countless streams, each splitting off from different actions. All of these different ideas, different scapes, they were fighting him. Time itself was fighting him.

He couldn't understand it. All of these different images, none of them were what he thought that Time should be, it wasn't anything that he had ever considered. Inside the prison where he spent most of his life, there had always been only one path, one riverbed, one timeline. Time flowing forward without end.

He was getting closer to understanding, and then his mind went blank.

The Timescape was banished, and reality returned. The day turned into night and Zach turned his head as the silence reigned.

The peak was gone, a white expanding ball had swallowed its top, the middle was cracking, white light piercing through the stone as it crumbled, as it fell toward the city. The three objects in the sky flashed away in far less spectacular displays of light, and the first falling rocks hit the top of the city. The shields flashed and failed, and death reigned on the buildings below.

A moment, or a second? Two seconds? He didn't know, time was slippery to his mind. A boulder, smoldering and filled with cracks was falling toward him, threatening to flatten him and the wall he stood on.

There was a hole inside his mind, and even without looking he knew that his True Link perks would be gone. Naha was dead. And he felt

something that was familiar, though he didn't remember when he had felt this last. An emptiness inside his heart, **loss**. He knew the word, even though he didn't remember. Naha had told him of his past, what she knew. And this... it felt familiar enough that he knew what would follow. Grief, pain, rage, then acceptance, he had gone through this before but his mind didn't remember, his heart though, it knew. How easy it would be to accept it, especially now when he had so many years under him. Naha was... he knew her for such a short time. A fleeting moment.

The two of them had something once, love. He didn't understand it, hadn't understood it, not until now. She was... there for him. She helped him, guided him, she was a bridge between this world and his old and tired mind. He had learned about her, gotten to know her, had taken her presence for granted. In his old and tired mind, he never imagined a time when she wouldn't be there. And now... pain of loss.

Ah, this is what she was talking about, love.

It hurt, and it made him angry. Rage boiled inside of him, wrath at their careless disregard for life. How many had they killed here, how many will die from the fallout, when that ball of glowing light expanded to its fullest. He saw no flaws in it, he saw nothing, no Essence at all. It was a collapse of order, of the world entire. As if it was anathema to all things that he understood. It was a blank spot inside his head, a hole that swallowed everything.

And they killed her, Naha, and Hiro too. The young child that was his responsibility, a young seed that could grow to shake mountains. That had so much to learn. And for what? To stop someone else from reaching the summit before them.

Pitiful children and ignorant fools.

He could kill them, make them pay for what they had done. Find all of them and end them, try to lessen the pain, the sorrow. Oh, how easy it would be to move on, to remember and avenge. The world itself would tremble before his **WILL**. They would perish, die as all things must at the end of time.

NO!

He thundered inside his own mind. The world was his to do as he willed, yes. He could feel his madness trying to twist him, to force him to disregard all things as inconsequential. To accept that Naha was gone forever.

But it was his willpower that could shape the world itself. It was his right, he had earned it over more than five thousand years of life of aimless existence. Thousands of years of carving words into stone. The Framework wanted him to play by its rules. It denied him power over Time, it denied him the right to create skills touched by Time, and Time itself refused him, fought his.

SO BE IT.

His Time Blade formed, and his will slammed into it.

REWIND.

He felt the blade strain under his willpower as he faced the river inside his mind, as he urged it to move. He heard the blade cracking from the weight of his will and Time. A wave exploded out of him, the river slowed. The boulder that nearly reached him moved back, time rewinding. A hundred meters, then two hundred, more space than he had ever influenced before. And not enough by a long shot. The time around him whined at him, it tried to reassert itself, the river splashed around his mind and the weight of it pushed on, uncaring for what he wanted. It was... It felt almost as if Time itself felt affronted that he would dare try and play with it. As if it looked down on him.

The boulder came again, the peak above it had now crumbled, the city pelted with debris. The glowing sphere of light expanded and filled the sky, a sun of empty light.

He smashed his will into the world around him. Seeking, crafting, a skill to turn it all back. His will stopped. A wall denied him, Framework, it stopped what he knew he could do. He opened his mouth and roared, a bellow of such might that he felt his throat tearing itself apart, the air rippled with his willpower and voice alone. He pushed as he had only pushed once before, and for a split moment, even the Framework buckled under his will. Something flashed in the corner of his mind, skills that could do what he wanted, created by his will.

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The Framework slammed down on top of him. The power of it sent him to his knees, the ground cracking. His head filled with white noise, and what he tried to grasp slipped through his fingers. He was denied, what he could do was taken from him, no skill shaped by Time for him. It stood in his way, once again.

He turned his eyes up at that empty sphere of light, projecting his anger on it. Anger for the Framework that thought it could keep from him what he had earned. Hate for the foolish petty monsters that knew nothing but wanton killing. Wrath at his own weakness, the madness in him.

Death was falling, only a few seconds had passed since the peak was destroyed, since she died. And he knew that there was no Time. The scape inside his head was shaking, and behind where the river carved a path he saw a city with three peaks destroyed, an image of it building as if out of sand. A moment in time, solidifying.

NO! TIME WAS PART OF THE WORLD, AND HIS WILLPOWER SHAPED IT.

The Framework didn't want to give him skills touched by Time. Fuck it then. No skill, nothing but Will and Aspect then. Let it try to stop him again.

He threw himself into his mind, into the heart of his understanding of the Aspect of Time. The behemoth that kept moving, uncaring for anyone or anything. And yet, Time had potential to be anything. And he saw it now, the changing images vying for supremacy. Each of them wanted to be the only scape of Time. The Aspect of Time was what understanding of others shaped it to be. A river delta with an infinite number of streams. A string drawn from a yarn. A tapestry. But Zach didn't want that, his understanding was different. Parallel rivers? Timelines? Grand design? *No*, there was only one river in his mind, a slow behemoth, ***The River*** that charted the course into unknown.

In the real world he pulled out two potions and downed them together: **Eternal Elixir of Aspect Enhancement** and **Eternal Elixir of Pure Willpower—Time and Willpower**, together. Power exploded inside of him and the Timescape trembled.

The other ideas about time grew fainter and Time screamed at him as it tried to refuse him. He pushed anyway; this was his realm. **His** to decide what it was going to be.

And then, a pressure built, opposing him. He could feel thousands of different wills opposing his own, he felt their surprise, disbelief, horror, anger, hate, even pleading. They acted as if he was going to take something away from them, as if they had some greater right than him. Some were strong, great and powerful, others weak and barely understanding of Time. They tried to fight him, each with their own understanding, each trying to force the Timescape into a shape that they believed should be right. Thousands of wills, each pulling in its own direction.

And all of them were so... young. He understood then, even the oldest of them were just a small part of his entire life. He had spent more than five thousand years contemplating Time, he was old, and they were young. This entire Infinite Realm was younger than he was. All paths, all focuses, all things that they created were just at the start of their journeys, barely discovered. And Zach's will was singular, his willpower was greater than theirs. They were disjointed, each standing alone.

MY WILL REIGNS HERE—his voice thundered across the Scape of Time, a nebulous place, inside his mind and yet... not, it was elsewhere too. Everywhere that Time touched. A Realm entire, both of form and not. The Aspect of Time.

The Timescape calmed, and singular image rose as one that was supreme. **The River of Time**, with him riding the first and only wave through a wasteland, life and past blossoming behind him. Yes, this was what Zach wanted Time to be. One Time-stream, that could be adjusted, slightly. No future, no fate, no countless parallel timelines, only one.

He turned back, looked at the moment in the past that the wave had already passed. He sunk his will into the river, into the wave all the way down to the riverbed, and he pulled. He ripped it out of the ground, and forced it back, through time. The water churned as if it was boiling, foam rose, and the world trembled around him. Barely formed past crumbled as he pulled the river back. Moments not yet solidified fell as they never existed in the first place, as he erased them from reality. A small portion of the river, water

riding the first wave flowed forward, escaping him, missed even by his willpower, but without the weight of the river behind it just fizzled out—a piece of the timeline that never happened.

He opened his eyes and the real world shook around him. Time bowed its head to him, and he felt it deep inside. His will had given it shape. In the real world, the glowing sphere of light was gone, the destruction and death never happened. All was as it was supposed to be. Notifications blared inside his head.

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	depends on your understanding of Time and willpower.
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The crystal on his wrist flashed and a voice spoke through.

“Zach, where are you?” Naha, still alive, or alive once again.

Zach turned his eyes to the peak and triggered his **Ring of True Recall**, returning to their guest quarters. There were intruders in the tower, or there will be.